The Snowy Mountains form an important part of the Australian identity. For many, the Snowies evoke images of Banjo Paterson’s Man from Snowy River and Australia’s pioneering spirit. But the Snowies are under threat.

Kosciuszko National Park covers an area of Australia’s rare alpine and sub-alpine region and was one of the country’s first national parks. A number of the park’s native species are found nowhere else in the world, making it an irreplaceable natural asset for all Australians.

Wild horses are only one of the introduced animals that are impacting on park’s plants, native animals and landscape. The review of the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan will consider the significance of these impacts, and how the wild horse population can be more effectively controlled. Other significant introduced species include deer, pigs, rabbits, wild dogs, foxes and cats. Information about controls for these species is available in the Southern Ranges Region Pest Management Strategy.

The Snowy Mountains are a unique Australian landscape and an irreplaceable natural asset for all Australians. The Country in Kosciuszko National Park has continuing significance for Monaro Ngarigo, Wiradjuri, Wolgalu and Ngunnawal Aboriginal people. The ecosystems of the Snowy Mountains are under significant and increasing pressure from introduced animals and plants.
The Snowies are unique

The Snowy Mountains are one of the few places on Earth with subalpine treeless flats and valleys. They contain over 204 species of flowering plants and 33 of those species are rare. An incredible 21 of them are unique to the Snowies – they are not found anywhere else on Earth.

The Snowies are the only habitat for a number of rare species like the mountain pygmy possum, the southern corroboree frog and 13 other species declared threatened or vulnerable by the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

Even the extensive peatland soils are unique, as are the alpine and subalpine bog and wetland catchments. They help to supply clean water for domestic use, agriculture, hydroelectric power, industry and a wide range of recreational activities.

The impacts of horses

The impacts of hard-hooved animals on the Snowies have been understood since the 1930s, when the area was declared a national park and the grazing of stock was phased out.

Today a range of introduced animals, including horses, deer, pigs, goats, rabbits, cats, foxes and wild dogs can be found in the Snowies. These introduced animals cause significant ground disturbance, damage vegetation, compete with native wildlife for food and habitat, and can even destroy native species through predation or habitat destruction.

The alpine and sub alpine environments are sensitive to overgrazing and land degradation, mainly because plants are slow to grow due to the long winters and short summers and fragile soils that are susceptible to erosion through compaction.

Wild horses are large, heavy and hard-hooved animals. Their increasing population in the Snowies is causing significant damage to riverbeds, streams, natural bogs, wetlands and soil structure, because they trample these environments when they feed or look for water.

The grasslands and other areas of vegetation are being overgrazed. Wild horses can spread weeds as they carry seeds in their tails, manes and dung. The weeds can then overgrow native vegetation and take hold of large tracts of land.

Disturbing the delicate soil structure destroys native vegetation in and around the waterways, which are used by native animals as habitat. Small native mammals, reptiles and amphibians potentially affected by habitat impacts include the broad-toothed rat, the alpine water skink, the alpine she-oak skink, the guthega skink and the alpine tree frog.

Wild horses can also foul waterways, creating a risk to domestic and industrial water supplies. They pose a potential biosecurity risk and can spread cryptosporidium and diseases such as equine influenza, African horse sickness and tick fever, which can have a devastating impact on local farmers.

Wild horses pose a significant traffic hazard and safety risk on major roads through the park. Some visitors have also felt their safety has been threatened when wild horses have displayed aggressive behaviour or intruded on their camps.

The damage to the Snowies by wild horses will continue to increase unless the wild horse population is more effectively managed.

Research has also shown that wild horse populations can displace native animals, such as kangaroos and wallabies, from their preferred habitat.
Getting the balance right

For many people, wild horses are an iconic part of Australia’s national heritage, and also an important part of their own family history. For many others, the value of the Snowies is found in its unique Australian landscape and its native plants and animals. It is also widely acknowledged that wild horses have tourism value.

The challenge is to get the balance right between the wild horses and our native wildlife and landscapes. The review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko will help to identify how that balance can be reached.

Protecting the Snowies

We need to protect the Snowy Mountains from further damage, for current and future generations.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) is responsible for the Snowies, within the bounds of Kosciuszko National Park. The NPWS is working hard to manage all the impacts and threats to this unique Australian landscape, and is collaborating closely with other land management agencies, neighbouring landholders, the scientific community and interest groups.

In 2006, a management plan for Kosciuszko National Park was developed to protect its unique alpine landscapes and wildlife. The plan aims to put in place targeted control measures for introduced animals to protect the environment. The management plan required the development of a series of sub-plans, including a Regional Pest Management Strategy to address specific threats to the park. The Wild Horse Management Plan is one of those plans and it aims to manage the impact of wild horses in the park. The plan was released in December 2008 and is now being reviewed.

This information sheet is part of a series describing the review of the Wild Horse Management Plan for Kosciuszko National Park.
The Wild Horse Management Plan review

The review will run until approximately May 2015 (Stage One). An Independent Technical Reference Group will:

– review and identify wild horse numbers, distribution and impact across the park
– provide advice on the most effective and appropriate methods the NPWS could use to control the wild horse population
– identify objectives for managing the wild horse population within the park.

The Independent Technical Reference Group has an independent chair and its membership includes scientists and individuals with expertise in the native plants and animals of the Australian Alps and Kosciuszko National Park; horse ecology and population control; animal welfare and veterinary science; and soil processes and erosion.

In addition to the work of the Independent Technical Reference Group, there will be a comprehensive communication and community engagement campaign throughout the review. This will ensure stakeholders, special interest groups and community members are actively involved in the process, and that the broad range of community views are heard and contribute to the final outcome. Consultation activities will include:

– meeting with stakeholder and special interest groups
– conducting focus groups with community members
– undertaking random telephone/email surveys of community views
– Inviting community members to share stories about their personal experiences in the Snowy Mountains
– running a 21st Century Town Hall meeting (a large group meeting in which issues are discussed and views captured and reported electronically throughout the meeting)
– facilitating Kitchen Table discussions (where interested community members hold structured discussions with their family and friends, and then provide the collective feedback from the group).

Following the completion of the review, and after considering the recommendations of the Independent Technical Reference Group and the outcomes of the community engagement activities, the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan will be redrafted, it will be exhibited and a call will be made for submissions on the draft (Stage Two).

Finally, submissions will be reviewed and the draft Kosciuszko Wild Horse Management Plan amended accordingly (Stage Three). The final plan will be implemented by the NPWS (Stage Four).

Have your say – get involved

For more information about this project and to get involved, go to the project website at www.environment.nsw.gov.au/protectsnowies.